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ABSTRACT

The effects of self-oriented and other-oriented questions on moral reasoning scores for two moral dilemmas involving stealing and school cheating were investigated. The reasoning scores of elementary school-aged children increased on other-oriented questions by the fifth grade. Females' scores showed consistent reasoning on self-oriented and other-oriented questions, while males' scores were higher on other-oriented than on self-oriented questions. The findings indicate that males are more likely than females to espouse double standards of moral reasoning, with one standard applying to their own actions, and another applying to the actions of others. The results also highlight the importance of using situations and questions for moral dilemmas which correspond to realistic people and actual events that children are likely to experience, rather than hypothetical story characters and improbable situations. (Author)

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Effects of Self-Oriented and Other-Oriented Questions on Moral Reasoning

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Effects of Self-Oriented and Other-Oriented Questions On Moral Reasoning

The usual Kohlbergian procedure for assessing children's levels of moral reasoning involves presenting a moral dilemma containing fictitious characters, and asking children to describe the actions these characters should follow. It is conceivable, however, that children might propose different actions for moral dilemmas when they, rather than the story characters, are the subject of the reasoning questions. This suggests a distinction between self-oriented and other-oriented questions, which can be viewed in the context of perspective-taking theory. The ability to differentiate one's own perspective from another person's develops gradually during the elementary school years, and despite methodological and conceptual problems influencing the assessment of moral reasoning and perspective-taking abilities, the results of numerous studies indicate that a moderate relationship exists between these two social cognitive domains (Kurdek, 1978). This study did not assess children's perspective-taking abilities per se, but rather examined how the perspective of the moral dilemma questions might affect the level of moral reasoning.

Extensive research on moral reasoning has examined the effect of the intentions of the story characters on moral judgments (Karniol, 1978). Keasey (1977) examined the effects of self- and other-oriented stories on the attribution of intentionality in moral dilemmas. He reported that first graders did not differ in their responses self- and other-oriented stories, but kindergarteners were more aware of intentionality for self-oriented stories. There is also evidence that during the elementary school years, children become less egocentric and more capable of taking the perspective of others (Shantz, 1975). This suggests that older

children would be more likely to distinguish between their own actions and those of others in moral dilemmas. Therefore, this study examined whether levels of moral reasoning differed on self-oriented and other-oriented questions about moral dilemmas.

The sample contained 102 children, 50 males and 52 females, with 36 first graders (mean age = 6-11, range = 6-4 to 8-3), 35 third graders (mean age = 8-10, range = 8-1 to 9-10), and 31 fifth graders (mean age = 11-1, range = 10-1 to 12-1). All but five of the children were white, and attended a public elementary school in a rural Southern California community. The first and third grade children were given the WISC Vocabulary Scale to provide an estimate of mental age. Standardized achievement test scores were available for first graders on the Test on Basic Experiences in Language, and for third and fifth graders on the California Test of Basic Skills in Reading. Within each grade, there were no sex differences in either mental age or achievement test performance.

Two stories containing same-sex characters were read to each child individually by a female experimenter. Following the reading of the stories and preliminary questions to assure story comprehension, subjects were asked four questions on each story, half pertaining to the subjects (self-oriented questions), and half pertaining to the story characters (other-oriented questions). The order of the two stories and the self- and other-oriented questions within each story were counterbalanced across all subjects. The reasoning responses were scored using Lee's (1971) descriptions of Kohlberg's moral reasoning levels, and inter-rater agreement on a sample of responses was 92%.

The cheating story involved a student who cheats on a spelling test by looking at his or her best friend's test without the friend's knowledge. The dilemma arises when the friend learns of the cheating. The two self-oriented questions concerned the actions the subject would take if their own best friend cheated from their test, or if they cheated from their best friend's test, while the two other-oriented questions asked about the actions that should be taken by the student who cheated and by the friend whose test was copied. The stealing story involved a dilemma in which one brother (sister) steals money from a store and another sibling borrows money from an elderly retired man without intending to repay the loan. The two self-oriented questions asked about actions the subject would take if someone borrowed money from them without repayment, or if they stole money from someone, while the two other-oriented questions involved the actions taken by the fictitious characters who stole and borrowed the money.

The main prediction was evaluated by testing for simple effects on the self- and other-oriented scores within each grade. The mean other-oriented score was significantly higher than the self-oriented score at the fifth grade (F (2,96) = 5.58, $p < .01$, means = 2.31 and 2.15), but not at the first and third grades (means = 2.03 and 2.08 for self- and other-oriented questions for both first and third grades). The reasoning scores were also analyzed by a 3 x 2 x 2 x 2 repeated-measure ANOVA, with grade (first, third and fifth) and sex (males and females) as between-subject factors, and perspective (self- and other-oriented questions) and story (cheating and stealing) as within-subject factors. The main effect of

grade was significant (F (2, 96) = 3.88, $p < .05$), and planned comparisons indicated that total reasoning scores increased significantly between the third and fifth grades (means = 2.05 and 2.23) but did not differ between the first and third grades (both means were 2.05). The main effect of sex was significant ($F(1, 96) = 13.72$, $p < .001$), with females scoring higher than males (means = 2.22 and 1.99). The main effect of perspective was also significant ($F(1,96) = 4.34$, $p < .05$), with higher reasoning scores on other-oriented than on self-oriented questions (means = 2.15 and 2.07). A significant sex by perspective interaction was found ($F(1,96) = 8.94$, $p < .01$), and tests for simple effects revealed that males had significantly higher scores on other-oriented than on self-oriented questions ($F(1,96) = 13.28$, $p < .001$, means = 2.10 and 1.89), while there were no differences on self- and other-oriented questions among females (means = 2.24 and 2.21). In addition, females scored significantly higher than males on self-oriented questions ($F(1,170) = 22.48$, $p < .001$, means = 2.24 and 1.89), while no sex differences occurred on other-oriented questions (means = 2.22 and 2.10). This inteaction was accompanied by a significant grade by sex by perspective interaction ($F(2,96) = 5.53$, $p < .01$), which was attributed to an increase at the fifth grade in reasoning scores by males and females on other-oriented questions, but only by females on self-oriented questions. Finally, the main effect of story type was not significant, but a significant sex by story interaction was found ($F(1,96) = 4.10$, $p < .05$), with females scoring higher than males on the cheating story ($F(1,96) = 22.02$, $p < .001$, means = 2.27 and 1.94) but not on the stealing story (means = 2.18 and 2.05). A significant grade by sex by story interaction ($F(2,96) = 3.36$, $p < .05$) indicated that the female's higher scores on the cheating story occurred at the fifth grade.

The correlation between self- and other-oriented question was .46 ($p < .001$), while the correlation between the cheating and stealing stories was .25 ($p < .05$). Performance on self-oriented questions was significantly correlated with chronological age ($r = .22$, $p < .05$), reading ability ($r = .28$, $p < .05$), and sex ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), while performance on other-oriented questions was significantly correlated with chronological age ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) and mental age ($r = .27$, $p < .05$). Performance on the cheating story was significantly correlated with chronological age ($r = .22$, $p < .05$) and sex ($r = .32$, $p < .01$), while performance on the stealing story was significantly correlated with reading ability ($r = .27$, $p < .05$), chronological age ($r = .22$, $p < .05$) and mental age ($r = .27$, $p < .01$).

The results indicated that fifth grader's scores were higher on other-oriented than on self-oriented questions, while no differences in self- and other-oriented scores were found for first and third graders. This suggests that while the ability to distinguish between one's own actions and those of another person is higher among older, and to some extent brighter children, older children nevertheless have a lower level of moral reasoning when they are the subject of the dilemma. These findings indicate that in addition to the intentional aspects of moral dilemmas, children's levels of moral reasoning are influenced by whether they or hypothetical story characters are subjects of the dilemma. One implication of these findings is that double standards about what is appropriate behavior for one's self, as compared to others, may be emerging at the fifth grade. An extension of this self- and other-oriented paradigm to older children

might clarify the extent to which these standards continue or decline with age. It would also be desirable to assess the relationship between self- and other-oriented questions on the one hand, and level of perspective-taking ability and moral behavior on the other hand.

Since sex differences in moral reasoning have not usually been found (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), no sex differences were predicted. The unexpected presence of sex differences could not be attributed to differences in mental age or reading ability. Females' scores showed consistent reasoning for self-oriented and other-oriented questions, and for cheating and stealing situations. In contrast, males' scores were higher on other-oriented than on self-oriented questions, but were consistent for cheating and stealing situations. This pattern suggests that the double standard of moral behavior suggested above may be more characteristic of males than females. The finding that females have generally higher reasoning scores than males, especially on self-oriented questions and the cheating stories, is consistent with the stereotype that females are perceived as being more honest and trustworthy than males (Burton, 1976; Bush & Nash, 1977). While reading ability was not significantly correlated with scores on the cheating story, the higher scores by females on the cheating story may be an indirect expression of the tendency for females in elementary school to be more concerned about school achievement than males. This study illustrates the need to examine the ecological relevance of moral dilemmas in terms of their correspondence to realistic persons and actual events that children are likely to experience, as compared with hypothetical story characters and improbable situations. It is apparent that like adults, children tend to espouse higher standards of behavior for others than for themselves.

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